

The Leech

THE SPIRITS DECREED THAT MRS. ABERCROMBIE'S DAUGHTER
WAS TO BE AN UNGATHERED BLOSSOM

By Margaret Busbee Shipp

IT doesn't seem polite to compare a wife and mother to a leech, nor was such a comparison suggested to me when I met Mrs. Abercrombie for the first time, at one of the agreeable Florida hotels. Her husband had invited me to make a fourth at bridge. Mrs. Abercrombie played an excellent game, though neither she, nor Work, nor Whitehead, nor any of the rest of them achieved what Mrs. Abercrombie believed she played—a flawless game. Her husband, a small, pallid man with no eyelashes—he looked like a lizard who lived under a rock—accepted her infallibility, and whenever he made a mistake he apologized to her instead of his partner.

She was well dressed—or, to be more accurate, she was expensively dressed. Her clothes gave the impression that they must have fitted admirably two months before, but that she had been putting on flesh since then, and that in another week the fasteners were going to snap somewhere. She had a florid skin, a lot of hair slightly and expertly touched with henna, hard, bright blue eyes, and the ample body which is spoken of as “fine presence.” At that first meeting, if I had been forced to describe her in a single word, it would have been “smug.”

I was mentally resolving never to be drawn into another game when something happened to stir my interest and—one might as well admit one's vices—to pique my curiosity. A girl came into the room—a lovely, slender creature, with a grace of movement as unconscious as an anemone swayed by wind. She leaned against Mrs. Abercrombie's chair.

“Dearest, shall we demonstrate to-night? Miss Hawkins and Mrs. Wilton are waiting to know. Please don't consent if you are tired after your game, precious mother!”

The hard, bright eyes did not soften. Why should they, when Mrs. Abercrombie continued to think exclusively of herself?

“I am not tired, Lois. I am at my best. I shall probably be able to give a magnificent demonstration. Tell them to come to my room at eleven thirty.”

She turned indifferently to me.

“I believe you have not met my daughter. Mr. Haynes, Miss Laurence.”

The name proved that Lois was Mrs. Abercrombie's daughter by a former marriage. One had a sense of fitness in finding that the pale saurian was not the girl's father.

However, he seemed eminently satisfactory to Mrs. Abercrombie. I learned afterward that they had been married only three or four years, that he had made money during the war, and that he was socially inferior to his wife, and immensely proud of what he termed “her litter-rery genius.” There are those who consider the mere act of writing a book as a literary achievement.

I was not invited to be present at the demonstration, but next morning, in a chat with sweet old Mrs. Wilton, I learned the details.

“It was a table-rapping. I've always had a hankering to see one,” she explained. “Lois and her mother and a friend had their hands on the table, and it said my husband wanted to speak to me. It is thirty years since he died. He asked if I couldn't feel his trembling eagerness to be near me again after our long separation. The table rapped it all out without a single mistake in spelling. It was a great surprise to me,” she continued placidly. “Judge Wilton was a very undemonstrative man, and I never before knew him to do any shaking and trembling. Mrs. Abercrombie's book is all about table-rapping, and ouija, and planchette, and everything like

that. I'll lend you my copy. I asked her why she called it 'Amaranth,' and she said I would understand when I read it; so I was ashamed to let her know I had finished it. It has been through two editions, and she has had hundreds of letters."

While it is impossible to predicate what may tickle the public palate, perhaps one of the popular touches in "Amaranth" was that Mrs. Abercrombie never used the word "death." It was "the advance." If anybody chanced to die, he either "advanced" or "progressed" or "demonstrated on a higher plane." As everybody can claim a relative, or at least several acquaintances, who have thus "advanced," it puts one into select company from the start.

A word here—it is the conscientious investigator who is most hampered by the mental charlatan. A man puts his whole mind and purpose into psychical research, and along comes the publicity profiteer, with a smattering of the terminology and a craving to be in the public eye, and the voice of the sincere seeker is drowned in the quacking of the quack. People unaccustomed to reading, but grasping pitifully at any comfort, could understand Mrs. Abercrombie's book, and could swallow its bald and demagogic statements, where they would remain bewildered by an open or reasoned argument.

"Amaranth" purported to give communications from the departed, but from Thomas à Becket to the late murdered Czar only spirits of well established importance during their "earth passage" dared seek an audience with Mrs. Abercrombie. There was a letter from Hypatia—not in Greek, but in such exceedingly modern English that she must have had recent instructors. Shakespeare declared he had always believed in spiritism, and gave several quotations to prove it. Daniel Webster's style showed that what he had lost in eloquence he had gained in exclamation points.

I was vastly interested to learn that Lucifer had tried again and again to communicate, but Mrs. Abercrombie had inexorably refused him. It must have been diverting to snub the devil himself!

There was a message from Rupert Brooke, saying that the pale roses of paradise reminded him of the souls of young girls, such as Lois, who was destined to be an ungathered blossom. And this banality

had gone through two editions, and the letters were still piling up on Mrs. Abercrombie's desk! Amazing, but the world was still running a temperature, and too much fever goes to the brain.

II

A MONTH was all that I had allowed for my holiday on the East Coast, but in that time I saw a great deal of Lois. Probably Abercrombie vouched for my social standing and financial rating, and my discretion, I hope, spoke for itself. Lois was eighteen, two years younger than my daughter Sally, whose bubbling *joie de vivre* made her seem like an inhabitant of a different planet from this grave child.

Oddly enough, the only time that an invitation of mine was refused was on a Sunday, when I asked Lois if she would like to go to church with me. Her mother answered crisply that she had never approved of the stereotyped churchgoer, who trains his children to attend church from *habit*.

"But isn't that better than to train them not to go?" I made mild inquiry. "Why not a good habit rather than a bad habit?"

She disdained to reply to this; but that evening, when Mrs. Wilton had invited us to dine with her, Mrs. Abercrombie held forth on "impeding orthodoxy" and "purblind religionists." From the way her hard, bright eyes rested on me, I knew she had classified me. I surreptitiously set down the phrases in a notebook to show to my wife, who has always taken an innocent pleasure in the fact that I'm a vestryman.

I writhe under religious discussions, and it is curiously distasteful to me to dissect one's intimate beliefs in public. Mrs. Abercrombie casually discussed the various aspects of her soul while making a liberal selection of *hors d'œuvres*, and as for her "aura"—it came along with the salad—she described it more minutely and positively than I could describe the skin on my right arm.

Her own creed seemed a melting pot of many tenets. I think her knowledge of Buddhism was gained from "The Light of Asia," which she quoted fluently. A book or two here, a magazine summary there, supplied the various phases of what she called her "dynamic and revolutionary thought."

When Miss Hawkins timidly ventured, "Are you a Presbyterian?" she stunned

the poor lady by answering, "I am an iconoclast."

Miss Hawkins vaguely murmured that her health had been poor for several years—I fancy she thought it a new sect established since the war.

I had sent down my car, and Lois went with me on many long rides. A little color would steal into her cheeks after one of these days in the sunshine.

One morning, as we were motoring along a stretch of shell road, I noticed the absent look in her eyes.

"You aren't seeing the sea," I chided. "Purple in the shadows of the waves, and the crests in the sun that marvelous blue! There's no other color so translucent and so beautiful, but the sea might be dull drab for all you are seeing."

She smiled in gentle apology.

"I was thinking, dear Mr. Haynes, but you will have to forgive me, because it was about you. I was wondering how anybody could be so kind, so good, so devoted to your daughter, and yet be"—she faltered a little over the word, and then fell back on her mother's phraseology—"an obstructionist, an impedier."

"God bless my soul!" I said, startled. "What path is blocked by an old fossil like me?"

"The path of truth," returned Lois earnestly. "You who refuse to accept the truth in which the world's hope and comfort lies, block the way of progress."

Of course I couldn't explain to the girl that it was the charlatan, like her mother, who did most to dazzle with a false light the seeker along that path.

"Dear child," I replied, "my hope is that you may never suffer because of it."

Her grave eyes brimmed with tears.

"But I have suffered." Her voice was muffled. "I am suffering all that it is possible for me to bear. I haven't spoken of it a single time to mother since we came here two months ago. She told me to banish it from my thought life to the outer rim of my consciousness, where it will gradually resolve into nothingness. I try so hard to banish the thought of—of Tom, that it seems to me I can think of nothing else. Somehow I feel as if it would help me to talk to you just once about—about him!"

Her voice dropped off to a whisper. It was I who presently broke the silence.

"My little girl is engaged. That's why Sally preferred to stay at home, where she

could see him every day, instead of coming with me. Of course my wife had to stay with her. He's a nice chap, straightforward and likable—a bit hot-tempered, but life cools that down."

Lois's eyes were shining like misty stars.

"You think so?" she questioned. "Then maybe Tom will grow sorry. If he should ask mother to forgive him, and explain that it was an outbreak of violent anger, perhaps she could forgive him."

The wistfulness in the young face gave my heart a pang. My happy little Sally!

"They quarreled?" I asked.

"Oh, no! Mother is too advanced, too far along the path, ever to quarrel. She dismissed him as an impediment in our progress. It was I who was angry. He dared call my wonderful, glorious mother a leech! He said she was draining my heart's blood. He wanted me to give up helping mother in her demonstrations, for the ouija works imperfectly unless my hands are on it. Many of the messages in automatic writing come through me. Mother asks the questions, but it is as if I were the medium through which the control works. I cannot explain it exactly. I don't understand it myself. When a message comes direct to mother, it is by what she calls 'wireless.' She sits very still, and hears a voice speaking to her clearly. Of course, no one else hears it, as it speaks only to the inner ear. Then she dictates it to me. After a demonstration of any kind I am always very tired—almost exhausted. The next day I have a bad headache. I am very glad to pay that small price to help mother in her work, but Tom was furiously opposed to it. In the end he declared that the choice was between his heart and a bit of lettered board."

The unseeing eyes looked out on the dancing sea, but now I, too, saw it as a vague blur. Nearer to me were the withheld tears in the girl's eyes.

Her lips quivered.

"He—he wasn't exactly handsome, but there was something in the way he held himself, so masterful, so compelling! One wanted him to look just exactly as he did; but he was adamant in his prejudices. For instance, I had been trained as a child to say 'my precious mother,' and I have always called her that; but even so trivial a thing as that vexed Tom. The one thing I have never doubted is that, in spite of his unreasonable attitude toward her, Tom

loved me. That I *know*; but now it is all over, and the very day afterward mother had the wireless message from Rupert Brooke that I was to be ungathered. Mother is thankful I shall always be with her. She had suffered agony in brave silence, she told me afterward, at the thought of sharing me with Tom."

A blossom-white hand lay against her furs. I raised it to my lips with what my wife calls "old-fashioned gallantry," though our saucy daughter dubs it "the incurable sentimentalism of the previous generation." Lois's quiet, controlled speech had made me think yearningly of Sally's gay current of nonsense and slang.

I dared not speak, for I knew the only word which could pass my lips would be Tom's phrase:

"The leech—the damnable leech!"

III

THE Abercrombies were living very quietly that winter, as Mrs. Abercrombie was engulfed in her correspondence and her magazine articles. They declined my invitation for the Blue and Amber Ball, but permitted Lois to accept it.

I arranged a party of four, with a gracious woman and her nephew—so attractive and dashing a youngster that I hoped Lois would forget about Tom for the evening and have a few hours of sheer youth and fun. Instead, it was her mother's maid, very ill with influenza, who engrossed her thoughts.

Lois wore a gown of amber tulle, which brought out all the gold-brown tints in her hair. Her hair was lighter on the curling ends, as a child's is, and one felt that it "would darken as she grew older." There were little bizarre wreaths of blue roses on the bodice and on the diaphanous skirts.

The ball proved to be a gorgeous pageant, as the blue and amber lent themselves to varied and effective costuming. A girl pirouetted past us dressed like a peacock, with the spread feathers in iridescent blues, and the touch of amber in her slippers and stockings.

"Clever, isn't it?" I commented.

Lois came back to her surroundings with a start.

"I was wondering if our poor maid had passed on. She was unconscious when I left. If she should wish to send a message, mother could not get into communication with her unless I were there to help."

I could have shaken her!

The youngster put it admirably later on: "That girl's a little beauty, all right; but it's as if one were dancing with fog—she is there, but impalpable."

When I said good night, on reaching the hotel, I have one dear and touching memory.

"You are really going on the early train, and this is good-by? I was such a tiny girl when my father died that I have no recollection of him; but I wish that I might have known him, and that he might have been exactly like you. Tell Sally she must be very, very happy!"

She put her young lips to my cheek. It was like the brushing of a rose petal.

A fortnight later, in New York, I met a man who had been at the same hotel in Florida.

"Sad about the pretty little girl, wasn't it?" he said.

My heart seemed to miss a beat. If only I might have taken her home to my dear wife's wise mothering!

"Hadm't heard," I managed to mutter.

"Her mother is right in it with the spooks, so to speak. Some women who had read her book didn't believe she could deliver the goods, and she wanted to show 'em. It seems the girl had gone to bed early, feeling half sick, but she got up again to help along with the table-rapping. You know how treacherous Southern nights are. I presume they didn't realize the girl was getting chilled, and she didn't say anything about it. The table gave a star performance, and about two o'clock in the morning the kid had a hard chill. Pneumonia developed. She was delicate anyway, and she put up no resistance to the disease. The doctor told me she was constantly promising her mother to send back messages to her, and that once Mrs. Abercrombie's nerves gave way, and she screamed at the girl not to say that again; but she was delirious and could not understand. The doctor said the poor little thing died without making any fight to live."

That's all I know. Sometimes I find myself wondering whether Mrs. Abercrombie ever faced the fact that she had drained her child's life and gained in exchange a passing vogue, or whether she is busily engaged in giving "wireless" communications from Lois.

Did the leech turn mother—or ghoul?